

Newley in the underworld

IT is curious how few British films have given an adequate or realistic picture of crime and the underworld, and that the best of this small handful should be the work of an American—Joseph Losey's "The Criminal." The latest native effort in this genre is **The Small World of Sammy Lee** (Columbia Cinema), written and directed by Ken Hughes and based on his own TV play.

Sammy Lee (*né* Leeman) is a Soho strip-club compère and small-time crook. He owes £300 to Conner, a Soho bookie, and is given five hours by a pair of Conner's thugs to pay up. Before this threat we have been introduced to a certain Barney Thompson, who owed £200 and now has 24 stitches in his face.

Razor of Damocles

Here, one might have thought, was an opportunity to present a convincing picture of Soho low-life as Lee goes around raising the money with this razor of Damocles over his cheek. But what we get instead is a series of tired vignettes of sub-Runyon characters as Sammy handles some shady transactions to produce the £300—stolen liquor, watches, phony cheques. He peddles reefers too, but refuses to take money from the prostitute across the hall, or sell the chair in which his mother died (though he later does, with a typically sentimental dissolve revealing the chair's absence). Only a visit to his brother Lou (beautifully played by Warren Mitchell), who runs a delicatessen in Whitechapel, carries any interest, but this scene goes on too long.

In fact all the sequences are unduly protracted, and most of the characters and situations are softened up, dissipating tension. The script will go anywhere for a laugh without regard for the quality of the laughter, presumably

FILMS

by PHILIP FRENCH

to exploit the obvious comic gifts of Anthony Newley, who plays Sammy. But the end result might better be called "Stop the Underworld, I want to Get Off."

When Hughes isn't telegraphing his punches, he is pulling them. Thus we cannot believe in the threat to Sammy, for the bookie's thugs are played without real menace. We know that Sammy will fail to raise the cash, but the course to his final meeting with the thugs is predictable rather than inexorable. When he is eventually beaten up he isn't even threatened with a razor, just given a brutal punching, the leading strong-arm man indeed seems so much impressed by the way Sammy has taken it that he refuses to touch his wallet. We can in consequence be regaled with the picture of a bloodily triumphant Sammy Lee (reminiscent of Brando at the end of "On the Waterfront") staggering around a vacant lot having somehow "found himself" as a man.

So another opportunity of taking an honest look at the London underworld is lost; fings are still unfortunately what they used to be in the British cinema.



A FEW years ago in an article on "Lolita," Lionel Trilling asked apropos of "the peculiar sexual hypocrisy of American life":—

To what end is a girl-child taught from her earliest years to consider the brightness and fragrance of her hair, and the shape of her body, and her look of readiness for adventure? Why, what other end than that she shall some day be a really capable air-line hostess?

These lines could well be the

epigraph to **Come Fly With Me** (Empire), the story of three such girls working on Polar Atlantic Airlines Flight 403.

The three-girl formula is a continuation of "the sorority movie" of the 1930s—the basic situation of many Deanna Durbin films for instance—the revival of which proved a godsend with the coming of the wide screen. The solution to the problem posed by all that space was to have *three* girls throwing coins in the fountain, *three* girls trying to marry millionaires.

Sequel specialist

More imaginative uses of the wide screen have since been found, but as befits a specialist in sequels Henry Levin, who directed "Jolson Sings Again" and "Belles on Their Toes," does not scorn traditional material or techniques, and so the three hostesses scamper from New York to Paris and on to Vienna with a view to friendship/matrimony. There's not so much as a storm cloud to threaten the passengers' comfort. The upheavals are all emotional. "Sophisticated" Donna (Dolores Hart) falls for an impoverished Austrian count travelling First Class who involves her in diamond smuggling. "down-to-earth" Berge (Lois Nettleton) is proposed to by a multi-millionaire Texan who travels Tourist incognito as millionaires have been doing these past 30 years in Hollywood films, and "vivacious extrovert" Carol (Pamela Tiffin) eventually pins down the wayward pilot, who is the archetypal Marlboro man. (The descriptions of the girls incidentally come from the synopsis and could scarcely be improved upon.)

The film dispenses instant travel and instant romance, but every foot of it is rich in sociological and iconographic material, from the cold bitchery of the girls' attitudes to the sly ambivalence about inter-continental relations.

Penelope Gilliatt is on holiday.

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